BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0778 MAY 13, 1976
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CAN RUSSIA FEED ITSELF?

ANNCR:

NEWS REPORTS FROM MOSCOW SAY THAT IN RESTAURANTS THERE, THURSDAY EACH WEEK IS A MEATLESS DAY. THIS COMES AS STATISTICS ACCUMULATE INDICATING THAT THE SOVIET FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL SUPPLY FACES GROWING PROBLEMS. VOA CORRESPONDENT MARK HOPKINS HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT FROM OUR EUROPEAN BUREAU.

VOICE:

BY ALL INDICATIONS, THIS COULD BE A LEAN YEAR IN THE SOVIET UNION. MEAT PRODUCTION IS ALREADY LAGGING. THE VEGETABLE CROP LAST YEAR FELL BELOW PLAN, ALONG WITH THE ALL-IMPORTANT GRAIN HARVEST. THAT HARVEST -- TWO THIRDS OF WHAT WAS EXPECTED -- HAS MEANT A HEAVY SLAUGHTER OF PIGS, CUTTING THE NUMBER BY TWENTY PERCENT. THE RESULT IS THAT THE MEAT SUPPLY WILL BE LESS FOR AN EXPANDING SOVIET POPULATION.

THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT CAN TURN, AS IT HAS IN THE PAST, TO COSTLY IMPORTS OF MEAT AND VEGETABLES TO MAKE UP FOR LAGGING DOMESTIC SUPPLIES. IT DOES CONTINUE TO BUY FOREIGN GRAIN, BOTH FOR BREAD AND FOR LIVESTOCK FEED. THE LONGER RANGE PROBLEM, AND ONE NOT JUST FOR THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT, IS WHETHER SOVIET AGRICULTURE CAN FEED A POPULATION OF TWO HUNDRED FIFTY-FIVE MILLION THAT IS INCREASING BY ONE PERCENT A YEAR.

A REPORT FROM THE AMERICAN CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY FORECASTS THAT SLOW CHANGES IN THE WORLD CLIMATE WILL TAKE HUGE FARM AREAS OUT OF PRODUCTION. ONE IS SOVIET KAZAKHSTAN, A MARGINAL AGRICULTURAL REGION THAT UNDER NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV'S "VIRGIN LANDS" PROGRAM WAS PLANTED TO WHEAT. IF CHANGES OF WEATHER WERE TO MAKE THAT SOVIET REGION UNPRODUCTIVE, IT WOULD FORCE THE SOVIET UNION INTO EVEN GREATER DEPENDENCE ON FOREIGN GRAIN -- CHIEFLY FROM THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA, BUT CANADA, TOO, MAY BE AFFECTED BY CLIMATE CHANGES.

WESTERN EXPERTS ARE ALREADY PREDICTING THAT THE SOVIET UNION WILL BE A MAJOR IMPORTER OF GRAIN THROUGH THE REST OF THIS DECADE. A BRUSSELS RESEARCH ORGANIZATION CALLED "EAST-WEST" PUTS THE SITUATION INTO GRAPHIC FIGURES: THE SOVIET UNION NEEDS TWO HUNDRED FIFTY MILLION TONS OF GRAIN A YEAR. ONE FIFTH IS FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION. THE REST FOR LIVESTOCK. EVEN THE PRESENT FIVE YEAR PLAN SEES ONLY A MAXIMUM ANNUAL GRAIN HARVEST OF TWO HUNDRED TWENTY MILLION TONS.

IF THE "EAST-WEST" ANALYSIS IS CORRECT, THE SOVIET UNION WILL HAVE TO IMPORT AT LEAST THIRTY MILLION TONS OF GRAIN A YEAR TO ADEQUATELY FEED THE SOVIET POPULATION. BUT WESTERN EXPERTS ARE BEGINNING TO DOUBT THAT SOVIET AGRICULTURE CAN EVEN ACHIEVE THE PLANNED GRAIN HARVESTS. THE U.S. AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT SAYS THAT THE WINTER WHEAT CROP ALREADY SHOWS SIGN OF BEING BELOW NORMAL. IT PROVIDES UP TO FORTY PERCENT OF THE TOTAL GRAIN HARVEST.

THE ACTUAL GRAIN HARVESTED IN THE SOVIET UNION AND PUT INTO STORAGE IS BELIEVED TO BE FAR LESS THAN OFFICIAL STATISTICS. FOR LAST YEAR, THE OFFICIAL HARVEST FIGURE IS ONE HUNDRED FORTY MILLION TONS. WESTERN ANALYSTS, SUBTRACTING FOR MOISTURE, PUT THE FIGURE AT A THIRTY MILLION TONS LESS THAN THAT.

WHAT THE VARIOUS FIGURES SUGGEST IS THAT THE SOVIET UNION MAY HAVE TO RELY ON AMERICAN AND CANADIAN WHEAT AND CORN FOR YEARS TO COME.

SO SOVIET AGRICULTURAL FAILINGS SEEM TO GO BEYOND SOVIET FRONTIERS, AND BECOME PART OF THE GLOBAL PROBLEM OF FEEDING THE WORLD'S GROWING POPULATION.

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